Testimony of

Mr. Bart Andersen
Minnesota Department of Transportation

Bridge Inspector for Council 5

of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)

Before the

Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives

On

"Structurally Deficient Bridges on the National Highway System"

October 23, 2007

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My name is Bart Andersen. I want to thank the Chairman and members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify today. I'm a bridge inspector and bridge maintenance worker for the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT). I am also a member of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Minnesota Council 5. My union represents transportation workers across the United States. I'm here today to explain how bridge inspectors are trained and how we conduct inspections. I'll also tell you about a variety of other duties that we're expected to perform on a daily basis to keep motorists safe.

Most importantly, I want you to know that I lack the resources to do my job well and keep motorists safe. In Minnesota, our Department of Transportation is broke and our transportation system is broken. MnDOT lacks the resources and manpower it needs to maintain its transportation infrastructure. It's postponing badly needed construction projects. It's sacrificing rural projects while focusing its attention on projects in metropolitan areas. As a result, driving is now dangerous.

Our two biggest problems are the lack of MnDOT staff and the lack of funds to do bridge work. MnDOT has only 77 inspectors who are responsible for 14,000 bridges. MnDOT policy is to check every bridge at least once every two years. About 30 percent of our bridges are "fractured critical." We're expected to check those fractured bridges once a year. There aren't enough hours in the workday for 77 inspectors to check 14,000 bridges the way we should.

Our inspection work leaves little time for us to do preventative maintenance, which is also a part of our job. Bridge crews typically consist of five to six workers. When two of us are instructed to do inspection, it leaves only three or four workers to do repairs. Before making repairs, those workers spend considerable time setting up traffic control. And they have only a five hour window because their work can't disrupt traffic flow during rush hours.

In addition to inspecting bridges, we have a host of other bridge related responsibilities that must be performed. We patch holes in the concrete on the bridges, and repair the concrete decks and railings. We repair all the wood and concrete noise and retaining walls. We inspect, repair and replace all of the structural steel support for highway signs. We build salt sheds, repair fences on the bridges, install lighting structures and repair culverts. A culvert is a concrete cylinder used to move water underneath the roadway. This is by no means a complete list of the tasks performed by the 77 bridge inspectors who are currently employed by MnDOT.

Recently, MnDOT hired private inspectors to assist with the backlog and help us meet a December 1st deadline to inspect all bridges. We do not believe that this is the long term solution to the problem. In fact, these private inspectors were hired after the I-35W bridge collapse. If MnDOT had a sufficient number of bridge inspectors prior to this tragedy, there wouldn't have been a need to bring in these private inspectors on an emergency basis.

In addition to insufficient numbers of personnel, we also lack funding to improve the safety of the bridges. Many of our bridges have reached their 20-year replacement age. To compound that need for investment, our bridges built since 1950 are on average four times the size of their predecessors. And the weight they hold is much greater as trucks are now carrying freight that trains used to transport. That means our bridges are under more stress and cost more to replace and preserve.

MnDOT's bridge inspectors are well trained. When employees start a career in bridge maintenance and inspection, they are required to take a one-week course on concepts for bridge inspection. We learn about bridge technology, architecture and key components. Then we attend a two-week training on "Comprehensive Bridge Safety Inspection." This course trains us to identify deficiencies and detect what's causing them. It also provides in-depth training on the Pontis System, which we use to record and document our inspections. Pontis lists key components that correspond with a numerical value that we use to ultimately rate the deficiency of a bridge.

In my opinion, the training we receive prepares us to do a good job of inspecting bridges. We get quality instruction and sufficient information. MnDOT also offers refresher training for team leaders who perform inspections.

Our inspection program treats bridges differently depending upon their condition and design. There are four categories:

- **Routine Annual Inspections** are typically done without specialized equipment. We visually survey the deck, bearings, railings, and any other accessible components.

- **Fractured Critical Inspections** are done with bridge inspection trucks, scaffolds or man lifts. Sometimes they involve more in-depth inspection of critical areas.

- **Underwater Inspections** are done by private contractors, not MnDOT employees.

- **Special Inspections** are unscheduled because they respond to traffic hits, heightened Homeland Security, and other unexpected problems.

In closing, please understand that MnDOT doesn't have enough full-time bridge inspectors to keep motorists safe. It's impossible for 77 inspectors to check 14,000 bridges throughout Minnesota while performing all of the other tasks that are part of the job. Also, we have a backlog of structurally deficient bridges and an increasing problem with steel fatigue in many bridges. But we lack the funding for replacement, repair and preservation.

Looking forward, as Congress considers these issues, I hope you will help us solve the problems of insufficient staffing at state departments of transportation. I hope you will help us with the lack of funding to maintain the transportation infrastructure. The work performed by people like me, who inspect, maintain and repair bridges, is critical to the safety of citizens who use the bridges everyday. As public employees, we are committed to doing everything we can to help protect citizens who use our bridges and highways. But we need your support to do our jobs well and keep motorists safe.

Thank you for listening. I welcome your questions.